



Race, Class, and American Polarities

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“Race, Class, and American Polarities”

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I disagree with almost everything in David L. Lewis’s article, “The Promise and Peril of Class in the Problem of the 20th Century,” except his conclusion. His depiction of American history is mistaken in many particulars, his concern about the Radical Right is overblown, and his claim that middle-class blacks are joining the conservative counterrevolution is not supported by the facts. But his final message – that the United States is a society divided by class and race, and that poor Americans may be even worse off in the future than they have been in the recent past -- may well be correct. If it is, then it is all the more important to get the causal story straight so that those of us for whom this conclusion is abhorrent can focus on the right allies and opponents. The Radical Right is not very influential and wealthy conservative African Americans are few and far between; the real danger lies in the casual self-absorption of almost all Americans and the alienation of well-off blacks from the political and social mainstream.

Let me spell out this argument first by disagreeing with Mr. Lewis, then by agreeing with him, and finally by venturing my own prescriptions. My disagreements are both small and large. A few small ones:

- Tocqueville did not “obviously” think that Jacksonian Americans were off to a good start; he was deeply worried about the future of the United States and deeply ambivalent about democracy;
- Tocqueville’s viruses *were* in fact “truly problematic” long before “comparatively recently.” Between 1840 and 1998, our nation fought a bitter and prolonged Civil War, witnessed several decades of violent confrontation between labor and capital, interned Japanese Americans in something close to concentration camps, had several more decades of cold war against supposed Communists, and enjoyed a half-decade of almost continual racial riots in the summer and campus unrest during the rest of the year. In that context, Patrick Buchanan and the Christian Coalition do not particularly stand out.
- Americans do not “now live politically and culturally on an increasingly darkling plain swept by the confused alarms of struggle and flight between the Left and the Right.” An unprecedented two-thirds of Americans approve of the job the President is doing. Surveys of public opinion show no increase in polarization on any issue since the 1970s with the possible exception of abortion. More detailed analyses of survey data show a rough centrist coalition for abortion rights (“safe, legal, and rare”) and affirmative action (approval of “soft” forms, rejection of “hard” forms [along with the Supreme Court and many African Americans]). Alan Wolfe is winning at least as much acclaim for pronouncing Americans to be “one nation, after all” as James

Davison Hunter ever won for declaring our nation to be engaged in a “culture war.” Ross Perot, Patrick Buchanan, and Jesse Jackson have faded from the electoral landscape and no protest candidates have arisen to take their place.

- There is no “national decline” in public schools, and probably none in universities (although I know less about them). Most public schools are producing students who are marginally better educated than students were thirty years ago. A few public schools are truly atrocious, and I will say more about them below.
- It is not true that the Radical Right’s “alloy” of “the politics of resentment [and] that of economic royalism” has “seldom” been seen before. That is the absolutely classic alloy – seen in Jacksonian populism (Andrew Jackson was a major land and currency speculator), turn-of-the-century Southern Populism, and even contemporary left-wing populism (consider the leftist politics of most academics and some nouveau-riche Silicon Valley entrepreneurs). So the Radical Right is following in well-worn tracks.
- Defenders of multiculturalism are not “increasingly beleaguered” and affirmative action is not being “gutted.” Most schools and teachers now claim to teach multiculturalism in their curricula and foster it in their activities; most corporate executives sing the praises of diversity. No state has followed in the wake of California's Proposition 209. President Clinton is on record as supporting affirmative action and Congress refuses to take up anti-affirmative action bills. I am not claiming that multiculturalism has gone much more than skindieep in classrooms or public sentiments, or that supporters of affirmative action can rest easy – they cannot. But the apocalyptic language with which Mr. Lewis discusses these and other issues distracts us from the real problems onto side issues.

And so on. I do not bring up these disagreements (and there are others) merely as debating points. The issues that Mr. Lewis raises are too important to permit that sort of indulgence. In fact, it is precisely because the issues *are* so important that we need to distinguish between real trends and political ebbs and flows, between historically unprecedented developments and old wine in new bottles. Thus it may not matter to people other than professors of American political thought how ambivalent Tocqueville really was, but it should matter to all of us whether our nation is engaged in a culture war, and whether schools are getting better or worse.

Let me turn to two major disagreements between Mr. Lewis and myself that these smaller ones presage. First, I see no grounds for believing that the Radical Right is taking over American politics. More Americans identify themselves as fundamentalist or otherwise deeply religious than do citizens of any other western nation, but those beliefs seldom translate into public policies. Prayer is not permitted in schools; publicly-funded vouchers probably will not be useable in religious schools once the constitutional dust settles; private religious school attendance is not rising. Abortion has not been outlawed; more women are in the work force than ever before. No plausible presidential candidate evinces much religiosity; the right hates President Clinton at least as much as the left does, and rightwingers were not much happier with Bob Dole. No New Deal social

welfare policy except ADFC has been gutted. Americans still claim to be eager to help the poor – they just believe (probably rightly) that the old welfare system did not do so. Whether welfare makes the poor worse off on balance is still in question; I believe that in many states it will once the economy sours, but we have insufficient evidence for any certainty. Nativist sentiment is indeed rising, but so far immigration restrictions are fairly minimal, and as more and more immigrants become voting citizens the politics of immigration policy could turn around. Where are the grounds for saying that the Radical Right has taken over American politics?

My other major point of disagreement with Mr. Lewis focuses on the increasing conservatism of the black middle class. He is right to say that well-off blacks are somewhat more conservative than are poor blacks on pocketbook issues – they prefer lower taxes, fewer restrictions on economic activity, and less social welfare spending. Even here, however, the data are neither strong nor consistent. What does come through strongly and consistently in surveys and electoral politics is the fact that well-off African Americans remain much more liberal on government taxing and spending issues than do comparably well-off whites. Barely a tenth of African Americans identify with the Republican party. Blacks are, as Mr. Lewis says, more culturally conservative on average than are whites – but the most culturally conservative are the working class and poor African Americans, not the well-off, and even Mr. Lewis is not worried that working class and poor blacks are flocking to the Republican party.

What does distinguish middle-class from poor blacks, and from most whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans, is their increasing disaffection from the nation as a whole. Better-educated African Americans are more likely than poorly-educated African Americans to believe that the government invented the AIDS virus in order to infect the black community and that the government deliberately brings drugs into black neighborhoods in order to debilitate them. In the 1960s, the worst-off third of blacks were more likely than the best-off third to believe that whites were actively hostile to the black community; by the 1980s, those positions were reversed. Racial nationalism has risen throughout the black community during the 1990s, but especially among the middle class. Middle class blacks are skeptical, at best, of school desegregation; contemporary culture heroes promote nationalism and scorn integrationism. On balance, that pattern does not hold for Latinos and Asian Americans, most of whom seek eagerly, even urgently, to move into the social, economic, and political mainstream as they understand it.

Thus Americans' problems over the next decade are *not* fighting off an ascendent Radical Right, winning or simply surviving a broad culture war, coping with deteriorating schools, recreating New Deal social policies, or wooing middle class African Americans back to liberalism. Those problems exist only on the fringes. What Americans *do* need to come to grips with (although they may not choose to do so) is the class disparity, intersecting with racial disparity, that Mr. Lewis addresses at the end of his essay. If most schools are pretty good and getting slightly better, some are horrendous. In fourteen schools in Hartford, Connecticut, fewer than 5 % of fourth-graders have achieved grade-level competence in state reading and math tests. In 15 out of the 18 high schools in

Washington D.C., just over 5% of students are reading at grade level – and children in Washington schools fall further and further behind their presumed grade level as they move from elementary to high school. No reader of *The Good Society*, or of the *National Review*, would keep his or child in such a school for a day, and yet we as a society (both Democrats and Republicans) tolerate the continuance of such schools for children of color. Democratic as well as Republican politicians shy away from any political stance that sounds like “class warfare,” and Democratic as well as Republican voters strongly endorsed the welfare “reforms” of 1996.

It is not surprising that most Americans seek to protect their own children from nonfunctional schools, and seek to move to the suburbs to protect their families from real or perceived high levels of crime. After all, as Robert Dahl pointed out to my graduate seminar three decades ago, why should anyone identify downward, with those who have no money, social status, or political clout, if they can identify upward with those who have the resources they want? Few politicians or political parties give Americans any reason to ally with the weak rather than with the strong, or any institutionalized paths for doing so. Policies ranging from the national highway system to municipal boundaries to functional divisions among social welfare agencies make it even harder for the nonpoor to connect with the poor in any long-term or constructive way.

The fact that the deeply poor are disproportionately, if not absolutely, more likely to be people of color adds a further barrier between them and the aspiring working or middle classes. We need not rehearse here all the reasons why members of the white working class distance themselves from members of the supposed black “underclass;” in that context, the Radical Right seems almost epiphenomenal. Here is where the increasing alienation of affluent blacks from mainstream society and politics is most deeply damaging. If middle class African Americans chose to do everything they could to enter and change the political system themselves, and to help poorer African Americans do the same, they might have a noticeable impact on the calculations of elected officials. And yet the proportion of African Americans who participate in electoral politics has been declining over the past two decades, and the proportion who see campaigning and voting as totally irrelevant to their lives and concerns has been increasing. This is not a claim that well-off blacks have more responsibility for members of “their” community than well-off whites do; they do not. We are all equally responsible, or not responsible, for other residents of our nation. It is, however, a claim that well-off blacks are likely to be more effective political actors, both in bringing other African Americans into the political system and in obtaining adequate responses from it, than would be whites – if they chose to get engaged. But alienation from white society, cynicism about conventional politics, and cultural nationalism are not conducive to the kind of slogging daily activity needed to overcome the racial and class barriers that separate city and suburb.

Thus we need not look to radical rightwingers, racists, capitalist overlords, or demagogues to explain “the peril of class.” We need only to look to politics as usual; as Pogo famously said, “we have met the enemy and they are us.” It will indeed, as Mr. Lewis says, take extraordinary efforts to overcome so many ideological, self-interested,

and institutionalized reasons for the nonpoor to separate themselves from the poor. The causes of America's racial and class hierarchy are much less dramatic than Mr. Lewis argues, but even more deeply embedded in our history and daily practices than he claims.

What is to be done? I cannot muster much more optimism than Mr. Lewis, but I agree with him in his call for a "revitalized social economics." In my reading of survey data and recent political activity, I see the greatest chance for cross-racial and cross-class coalitions to lie in specific policy initiatives that stay away from explicit racial zero-sum games. Therein lies the (perhaps forlorn) thread of hope in workfare. If in fact employers and states can be pulled and pushed into providing jobs and the associated support services needed to keep poor mothers in jobs, the poor will at least have a foothold on the proverbial ladder of opportunity. A lousy job is probably better than no job at all, as most welfare recipients themselves have consistently claimed. Similarly, therein lies the (perhaps forlorn) thread of hope in national voluntary achievement tests. If in fact school boards and teachers can be pushed and pulled into teaching children to read and add, the next generation of poor will have a little more chance to succeed. A test that fails some students but gives more the resources they need to learn is probably better than no test at all, as most poor parents themselves have consistently claimed.

Following the same logic, I would urge progressives not to put so much psychic and political energy into fighting for affirmative action. At best, it does almost nothing to help the deeply poor. At worst, it distracts progressives and drains scarce resources from fighting for the broader, more structural reforms needed to really change the class position of so many African Americans. After all, we might do well to remember that initially affirmative action was the preferred policy of the political right, who hoped that sponsored mobility of a few smart and energetic African Americans would reduce pressure for broad society-wide changes in schooling and jobs. It would be one of the worst ironies of these past few difficult decades if President Nixon turned out to be right in that gamble.

Thus I disagree with Mr. Lewis in almost everything of relatively small importance in his essay, and I agree almost completely with his most important point. We do indeed live in a society with a deep racial and class structure, and most Americans do not want to face that fact or deal with its consequences. If we are really to make any headway against that situation, we need to stop looking for dramatic villains and start looking at mundane, everyday practices that either perpetuate inequality or can be used to contest it.